

WANDERING FROM PITCH

by

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Several writers have expressed their views in this Journal about a natural phenomenon: the wandering from pitch of their singers. I have also before me a leading Church Music Magazine in which a writer is at pains to give devices to overcome this difficulty especially with child choirs. From a long experience with choral groups in several countries,¹ my own views are at variance with almost every writer on the subject. It may even come as a surprise if I say that African singers, even children or a whole congregation, can keep pitch when they are accompanied (by the harmonium, for instance, provided they can hear it enough); and that any musician who can transpose, or has a transpositor keyboard, could obviate the tendency in his singers. I do not find it a problem. But a few simple 'rules' should be observed. These will be best illustrated by the following experiments I almost accidentally went through more than a score of years ago.

My first experience came when I was a young vocal teacher of some seventy boys between eight and twelve years old. My singers would often sing flat; and their voices were harsh, strained, also. The latter defect was corrected through simple exercises at the beginning of each lesson: vowel sounds sung *down* the scale in a slow movement; higher and higher, until they could start at ease on high G, but always in a descending movement. But they still occasionally sang flat. Then, one Sunday, during an early Mass, singing first a hymn I had written for them, they kept a perfect pitch. The next hymn they sang flat; not even the powerful organ could help them. What had gone wrong, now? I was puzzled. But as the first hymn was written in E flat, I thought of transposing in E flat also the next hymn they were to sing. That was it: not the slightest change in pitch occurred. Soon afterwards I found out that whenever they sang *in flats* they maintained a perfect pitch. From then on, I never had any serious trouble with children or adult singers anywhere—although I have often been at pains to explain why I seldom write choral music which is not in flats.

The same year, at the beginning of the commencement exercises, my young singers had hardly gone through a few bars of their opening number when they started to wander miserably from pitch again. I stopped them on the spot; then, the consternation of a packed hall on a warm summer night. I asked an attendant to shut two big windows making a draught in front of the stage; we started over again and everything went smoothly; the audience was most co-operative afterwards, and we went through our programme without any other hitch.

Finally, the lad of ten whom I wanted to sing the leading part of an opera for boys was, apparently, unable to sing alone: he would strike any note except the note I gave him.² I sent him to the back of the hall, and from there he had to 'find' the note I would give him at random and keep sounding on the harmonium; after several unsuccessful tries he finally could jump with assurance on any note I would strike, and soon he was able to learn his part.

Now, I do not intend to be involved in a lengthy discussion on the laws of the physics of sound, because I have nothing new to offer; the laws of acoustics, like the laws of music and mathematics, are fixed and immovable. But in the light of the above experi-

¹ For the past 35 years in Canada, Sudan, Madagascar, Basutoland, U.S.A., Basutoland, in that order.

² Singing Falsetto, as I always do when teaching children.

ments, it seems to me that we often overlook the subject approach to the gist of the matter: the training of the ear and the care of the human voice.

It is certain that the training of the ear is the important factor in good singing,³ and no doubt African children could be trained to sing European music with all its appendages of sharps and flats: I have done it with Azanda (Sudanese) boys, though one had to admit it was a work of patience. But with adults, we waste our time: the tendency our melodic line has to lead to a change of key, our frequent and intricate modulations, our baffling harmony, all tend to create insuperable pitfalls for the vast majority of Africans. But the problem has little to do with the laws of acoustics. Why, then, should wandering from pitch occur even when they sing their own music alone or accompanied? I consider this as a normal phenomenon connected with the care—or rather with the lack of care—of the human voice; a phenomenon more physiological than physical:

(a) Vocal chords under strain for too long tend to relax and the frequency of the human voice is now less than before; therefore, a slip to lower pitch is 'normal';

(b) Vocal fatigue sets in quickly on any empty stomach; that was the case with my young singers during an early Mass: that is almost always the case with our African people any time of the day;

(c) Singing outdoors in a draught of air, or against the wind in the open, likewise 'mollifies' the vocal chords, makes them flabby and causes a rapid lowering of pitch;

(d) When one is excited—and the emotional African is easily excited; music arouses him quickly—the nerves are naturally tighter, shorter should we say here, then the pitch of his voice tends to rise; is not this implied when we remark that one 'raised his voice'? The more excitement, the greater the emotion, the higher the voice will raise.

(e) It would appear that the frequency and/or overtones of the human voice adjust themselves better to instruments with a fixed keyboard when these play in one or more flats, and that the ear follows better. As I do not possess any audiometer to control this theory, I might be utterly wrong.

The reader might find that I dismiss the problem in a rather summary fashion . . . Nevertheless, I invite him, if he is in a position to do so, to try something in the line of the experiments I have described, specially in connection with (e), and then judge the accuracy of the conclusion on its merits.

³ Cf. *rythmes des tambours*", pp. 68 et seq. where I have treated that problem at length.